Mercury in the environment.

Mercury contamination of fish is a widespread problem. Some species of salt and freshwater fish often contain enough mercury to pose a health risk to consumers, especially pregnant women and children.

How widespread is the problem? All the New England states and Eastern Canadian Provinces have lakes and ponds with fish that have elevated levels of mercury. In Massachusetts, almost half of the lakes and ponds tested have one or more types of fish with unsafe levels of mercury. Over 40 states have issued fish consumption advisories due to mercury.

Where does mercury come from? Mercury is a natural element and can be found at low levels almost everywhere. However, human activities such as coal burning and trash disposal have significantly increased mercury levels in the environment. Many common products contain mercury and can pollute the environment when they are incinerated, landfilled, broken or disposed of down drains.

Why is mercury in fish? In lakes, ponds and the ocean, mercury can be transformed by natural processes into a more toxic form called methylmercury. Methylmercury is absorbed by small organisms which are then eaten by fish. The mercury becomes concentrated in the fish. In fact, the level of methylmercury in fish can be up to a million times higher than in the water the fish lives in. Thus, the fish may be unsafe to eat even though the water is safe to swim in or even drink.

Why is the problem so widespread? Once released into the environment, mercury persists for long periods of time and does not degrade into harmless chemicals. Mercury can have local impact or be carried across whole continents by the wind. Even remote lakes and ponds may be polluted with mercury.

What is being done about mercury pollution? The high mercury levels in fish from lakes and ponds across the region prompted the New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers to adopt a regional mercury action plan in June, 1998. This plan has spurred many aggressive actions to reduce mercury pollution in the region. Massachusetts has already lowered mercury emissions in the state by more than 50%. The Executive Office of Environmental Affairs is spearheading a multi-agency, statewide initiative to eliminate unnecessary uses and releases of mercury.

When will the fish be safe to eat?
Because mercury persists for so long, it will be many years before mercury levels in our fish decrease significantly. It is important to be aware of and follow fish consumption advisories.

Stop mercury from rising.

Brought to you by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs and Department of Environmental Protection.

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